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# **POTTERY AND IDENTITY IN SAXON SUSSEX**

## **pottery and identity in saxon sussex**

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### **SUMMARY**

This paper explores the ways in which pottery manufacture served to create and maintain feelings of identity in Saxon Sussex. The concept of identity is outlined before the archaeology of Saxon Sussex is introduced. A practice based approach to pottery manufacture is then taken to explore the ways in which pottery manufacture caused people to perceive themselves in relation to their landscape, to each other and to pottery.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Identity is at the root of much Early Medieval archaeology. One of our main historical sources, Bede's ecclesiastic history, has in many ways set a manifesto for research into ethnic groupings and the movements of Angles, Saxons and Jutes and their amalgamation into the English. As archaeologists we have in the past attempted to see these identities represented through objects, looking for example at the movement of specific styles of brooch or cremation urn. As we stand here in the modern climate of archaeology, identity has become something of a buzz word with many inadequate definitions and applications. Still, there is, in many ways, a preoccupation with ethnicity and an almost culture historical view that practice and behaviour is identity. We are coming to realise however that the reality is much more subtle, that practice is a building block of identity yet identity is also a building block of practice. In this paper I shall review some

of the current literature on identity creation before discussing this in the context of my study area, Saxon Sussex.

## **THE STUDY OF IDENTITY**

Identity is the way in which people perceived themselves and were perceived in the past. I would argue that to completely reconstruct this is impossible. All we can ever do is reconstruct the circumstances and relationships which create identity and form our own categorisations through observation. I have not set out looking for any particular scales or types of identity, but entered into the study with an awareness that identity is changing and plural (Conlin Casella and Fowler 2004, 1). The model of identity I am creating here is not a new one, and it draws largely on the structuration theory of the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979/2002). I also acknowledge that it is a somewhat simplified version of identity construction and that other factors will play a role. We can see practice and time being the key constituents of both identity and the material and social world in which it is created. Practice is a set of relationships between people, objects and the natural world, governed by factors such as experience and upbringing with no hard and fast naturalistic rules. These practices are carried out through time and thus they act as a medium through which the social environment is built, reconstructed and modified (Gosden 1994, 8). A history of practices is therefore a life history, unique to every person, artefact and landscape. In order for practices to continue they have to be carried out in a material and social environment through time, so in as much as practice can be seen to structure this world so this world structures practice. Within this world and this concept of biography people perceive and place themselves in relation to objects, people and their landscape through practice. It is this perception which is identity.

Material culture is often all we have left of the past and therefore its place within this model needs to be defined. The pot, to take an example, is the result of technological practice. These practices are governed by technical considerations as well as social, political and economic influences (Dobres 2000, 96). The sequence of pottery manufacture can be broken down into sets of relationships. Some of these are visible archaeologically, some can only be speculated from analogy and some will be highly personal and contextual and thus completely invisible (Gosselain 2000, 248). Once a pot becomes situated in the material and social world it can be seen to be developing an identity resulting from the practices it partakes in. The process of objectification occurs whereby the pot is created by us but at the same creates aspects of us (Miller 2005, 9-10). To take an example from pottery manufacture, skill can be seen to be creating the vessel but the act of producing the vessel can be seen to be creating skill (Ingold 2000/2004, 262). Such a viewpoint is untenable because it makes the pot and the person indistinguishable. We have to sink to a lower analytical scale, and see the pot as acting with a person. Objectification therefore becomes the way people in engage with things in order to play out their practices within the constraints of their context. Further meaning is generated through interactions with a pot, the users ideas of function are projected onto the object just as the material properties of the pot informs this perception of function. In this way pots can abstractly at least be seen to be acting to generate and reinforce their place in relation to people and other objects, and thus generate and reproduce their identity.

It has been implicit so far that identity cannot be thrust upon the past, nor can it be the initial aim of studying an artefact assemblage. The assemblage itself has no meaning, it is only once it is used to reconstruct the world in which it originally existed and the practices in which it partook that we can begin to ask questions

about identity. As identity is highly contextual, we must understand the wider context before studying pottery in depth.

## **SAXON SUSSEX**

The modern county of Sussex formed the kingdom of the South Saxons in the Early Saxon period. In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries this kingdom declined to become amalgamated into Mercia and then Wessex. A number of sites are known from Sussex from both the Early and Late Saxon periods. These are largely focussed on the coastal plain and the South Downs (Welch 1983). This may be partly due to a lack of archaeological fieldwork in the Weald but is also due in part to this area probably being quite densely wooded. Both cemeteries and settlements match this pattern (fig. 1).

The area was divided into formal units. Hundreds existed before Domesday and are probably a 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon, however it is possible that they were based on earlier less formal divisions of land (Joliffe 1930). They may have developed out of natural communities with similar interests, bounded perhaps by geographical features. Thus each hundred or group of hundreds would have different interests in terms of maintaining subsistence and the calendar of events for a year would vary greatly (table 1), naturally causing differences in peoples perception of time and the landscape. The 10<sup>th</sup> century brought civil defence and thus burhs to Sussex. Chichester, Lewes and Hastings developed as urban centres whilst Burpham and the mysterious Eopburnham remained purely military sites, perhaps supported by the growth of smaller urban centres such as Steyning and Rye. The vast majority of Domesday settlement was located along the coastal plain and the downs. Both rural and urban settlements existed, causing differences in peoples lifestyles and perceptions of their World.

Of the rural sites the largest are at Bishopstone and Botolphs in the Ouse and Adur valleys respectively. At Bishopstone Early and Late Saxon settlements are known. The later settlement is in the valley bottom whereas the earlier settlement is on top of a ridge, inhabited since the Bronze Age. The two settlements are very different, the earlier site on Rookery Hill consists primarily of sunken featured buildings (Bell 1977) whilst the site in the modern day village is a cluster of halls and pits which have been interpreted as being a Minster or Thegn's home (Thomas 2005, 9). This is based on the presence of a rare latrine feature, a possible tower and evidence for metalworking. In the Adur valley a rural settlement at Botolphs again uncovered late and early occupation although it is possible that the site was abandoned in between these two phases. The evidence in terms of buildings is similar and subsistence was based mainly on farming and salt exploitation (Gardiner 1990, 240).

Major excavations have taken place in two towns; Steyning (Gardiner 1993) and Chichester (See Down 1989 for the most up to date gazetteer of sites in the city). Both developed into urban centres with mints. Other rural sites are also known, sunken featured buildings have been found at Westhampnett (Chadwick 2006) and North Marden near Chichester (Drewett 1982) and at Old Erringham at the mouth of the Adur (Holden 1976). Small settlements of Early and Late Saxon date are known at Hassocks (Butler 2000) and Pagham (Gregory 1976) and evidence of settlement has also been found at Pevensey (Lyne unpub.).

By 1066 the Sussex landscape was heavily managed with communities grouped by their environment as well as political allegiance and no doubt other factors such as religion. This landscape like every person and object in it developed over time with its own biography and had meaning and perceptions endowed upon it. Whilst looking at one class of artefact, pottery, is somewhat restrictive, it is the only artefact commonly occurring on every site and its nature is such that it can

be involved in a number of practices related to a number of spheres of interaction. Pottery production and use are also experiential processes involving a number of interactions with the material and the object in which meaning and perception are developed (Ingold 2000/2004, 251), just as they are we analyse an archaeological assemblage (Holtorf, 2002, 60).

The pottery from these sites is fairly similar to the untrained eye. The majority of vessels are sagging jars, tempered with flint and unevenly fired. On closer inspection however the practices behind them are variable. I shall focus here on aspects of manufacture. This is primarily because ceramic use has yet to be consistently studied in the area. The focus is necessarily on the general picture and thus the idiosyncrasies of individual assemblages will not be discussed.

## **IDENTITY THROUGH POTTERY MANUFACTURE**

The pot can be seen as a medium through which a number of practices can be investigated through the signatures which they leave. Not all of the practices which have taken place in the pots biography will be visible and their full implications cannot necessarily be understood. We can however begin to reconstruct the role the pot played in the particular social context. The context of manufacture was probably one of household or small workshop production (Hodges 1980, 98).

In many cases the dating evidence is sparse and insecure however it seems that the Norman Conquest does not have a major or immediate impact on ceramics. In Chichester the general methods of ceramic manufacture continue into the 12<sup>th</sup> century although at a different production site (Down 1978, 353). Similar continuity is exhibited in a recent assemblage from Lewes (Luke Barber, pers. comm).

## **Resource Procurement**

At all of the sites in Sussex clay and temper were collected locally (table 2). This is probably related to a need to fit in with other economic activities which were probably more important (Arnold 1985, 99-108). It is unclear at what time of year resource procurement occurred although if we assume material from north of the Downs was brought by boat down the rivers Ouse and Adur to Botolphs and Bishopstone it would be reasonable to suggest that these trips may have had a secondary purpose, possibly linked to the movement of iron resources from the Weald or the movement of an agricultural surplus.

Local resources were used in both the Early and Late Saxon periods but there were some significant changes in distinct areas. Whilst in some places new resources were utilised in others they were not. I would suggest that this is potentially linked to a changing relationship with the landscape, at least in the case of Bishopstone (table 2). Settlement shift may have altered peoples understanding and perception of their landscape through the way they acted within and created it through practice. This may have led to its resources' being utilised in a different manner. This may not have been the case, such as at Botolphs, where there was more stability in the position of the settlement (Gardiner 1990, 240). The individual's stable perception of their place in the landscape is perhaps reflected in the consistency in the clay resources utilised. The choice was not necessarily governed by utilitarian factors but by a wider understanding of clay in the landscape, brought about through the potters socialisation (cf. Blinkhorn 1997, 119). At Chichester there is a further change. In the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries a range of clay resources were used from around the city but the development of the Chapel Street industry in the 10<sup>th</sup> century caused significant changes in the pottery production process. The Eocene clays found in



the Chichester Channel were exclusively used by potters operating within this industry. On this basis it can be suggested that this resource was controlled. This may have acted to reinforce Chichester's place as an urban entity, controlling the surrounding landscape. Access to this controlled resource may also have allowed a particular group of potters to become perceived as full time artisans, rather than part time craftsmen (Jervis 2007).

## **Fashioning**

During the fashioning of pots the potter has a dialectic relationship with his material, experiencing and reacting to changes to form the object (Ingold 2000/2004, 251). A number of ethnographic studies have demonstrated that the skills required to manipulate the material take a long time to acquire and are heavily linked to the history of the potter and his interactions with pots and other potters (e.g. Roux 1989). The repertoire of Saxon potters was quite limited, the majority of vessels made were simple sagging jars (figs. 2 and 3). Over time there is a change however from inverted and straight rims to more sharply everted rims (Lyne unpub. 386; Gardiner 1990, 246; 252; Bell 1977, 279; Jervis forthcoming). There is also an introduction of the tournette for finishing pottery and these everted rims gradually become squarer (Gardiner 1990, 253). The introduction of the tournette may also have facilitated the production of larger vessels (Jervis 2007). Further variability is exhibited in the assemblage at Chichester where larger vessels such as pitchers were produced and as well as large platters (Down 1981, 184-91). Pitchers occur in the highest numbers in urban contexts, although are also present at Pevensey and Bishopstone. Their chalk tempered fabric marks them out from the majority of vessels which are tempered with flint. Whilst these vessels conform to a wider tradition stretching as far north as the Thames Valley, the purpose of these vessels is unclear. Their presence may however mark some change in consumption practices or the

development of a new form of food or drink preparation (cf Down 1981, 190). Both of these vessels types often exhibit pie crusted rims. I would suggest that this change in fashioning practice is primarily related to changes in use practice rather than an increased understanding of clays potential. The pie crusting could be related to a change in the scale of manufacture to a small workshop (Down 1981, 190-1) and be an overt statement of individuality by potters working in Chichester. These changes in practice are difficult to interpret. Dramatic changes in forming technique, such as the adoption of the wheel generally occur over long periods of time and are heavily grounded in social relations, particularly learning networks. The changes which occurred here are not hugely dramatic but it is unclear whether they would be noticed or understood by non-potters (Gosselain 2000, 248). Pottery forming techniques were fairly stable and this could be due to the demand being for vessels which were required, but also reproduce, stable patterns of consumption. New forming techniques and forms were only introduced when the requirements for pottery changed, due to changes in use. It is reasonable to suggest that these developments operate on two levels, at the level of wider regional identity based on the superficial but widespread changes in form but also at a more localised level of potting groups based on the gradual change in techniques, the objectification of the development of potting skills, such as the use of the turntable.

## **Decoration**

The majority of the pottery is undecorated meaning this most common of indicators of stylistic groups and cultural identities is not fully open to us. Where there is decoration it is focussed on Early Saxon pottery and is primarily in the form of stamps. The motifs of these stamps form part of a decorative network, appearing on other forms of material culture. A tradition of burnishing the exterior and the inside of the rim occurs on Early Saxon and small amount of Late

Saxon material from the Adur Valley (Gardiner 1993, 41). In West Sussex and into Hampshire stamping continues into the Late Saxon period, possibly due to the influence of continental imports (Cunliffe 1974). In the east stick-end decoration is more common (fig. 4). The distinct zones of use of these decorative forms may indicate some divide between east and west but the presence of this decorative form in the Adur Valley and at Chichester emphasise that any barrier was permeable and that influences continued to flow across the coastal plain. Thumb impressions are a Late Saxon development and occur across Sussex. They are most prominent in Chichester and Steyning and may be indicative of particular workshops, or of a desire to identify with potters from other urban centres where similar decoration was used. This may also have acted to create a divide between urban and rural, although thumb impressions are present, albeit in smaller quantities, at rural settlements. Highly visible changes of this type have been defined as being related to the more temporary and situational facets of identity such as economic pressures (Gosselain 2000, 189). Decoration is a strong indicator of the tension between local interaction and wider interaction and control, both with the rest of Southern England and the rest of Sussex. Detailed study of motifs may enable further understandings of these levels of interaction and their longevity.

## **Firing**

Firing is a crucial practice in pottery manufacture. It is also the result of the most complex system of relational practices. Firing requires an understanding by the potter of the way his materials react to the firing process. The production of the clamp kiln however requires interaction between potters and landscapes and other people; picking appropriate fuel, placing the kiln in an appropriate place and so forth. All of the pottery was produced in simple bonfire or clamp kilns, one of these has been found in Chichester and is believed to date from the 10<sup>th</sup> century (see Down 1981, 190-1 and Gardiner 1990, 251 for a discussion of date).

A significant change in firing technique occurs, most notably in Chichester but also at Botolphs and to a lesser extent at Bishopstone and Pevensey. This is the introduction of oxidising conditions causing the pottery to have an orange or red surface rather than a black one. This practice requires a greater amount of control over firing if it is intentional, or can be the result of a lack of control. It seems to be a purposeful strategy at Chichester where the vast majority of pottery is oxidised (Down 1978, 347). Where it is present in lesser quantities it is unclear why it occurs. It is however a Late Saxon development and as such can be seen to be linked to the introduction of the turntable and a greater amount of skill and effort being placed into pottery manufacture.

The development of oxidation at Chichester can be seen separately to the developments elsewhere, with distinct practices causing the development of an increasingly distinctive urban identity, producing pottery distinct from that used in the surrounding area. This may have been appreciated by non-potters but also appreciated in a more personal and, for want of a better phrase, professional manner by potters, making them distinct from the household potters producing reduced wares (see Saunders, 2000 for a more general discussion of this phenomena). Oxidation was quickly adopted at Steyning (Gardiner 2003) but in more rural areas, such as at Bishopstone, it appears to have developed more slowly, re-enforcing the concept of the urban as differentiated from the rural. This change in technical process, linked to an increased level of skill and understanding, can tentatively be suggested to represent a change in the intended biography of pottery, no longer is it intimately linked to the community which manufactured it, it is made in a workshop for sale and commodisation. Any meaning erodes away and is gradually consumed with new meaning manifesting itself over time (cf Kopytoff 1986, 73).

## **Summary**

Identities are created and reproduced through the participation of individuals in recurring practices. Only some of the ways people perceive themselves are relevant to pottery manufacture. Resource procurement acted to reproduce peoples perceptions of themselves within a landscape, and to locate themselves and their activities within changing patterns of agricultural and settlement activity. Wider similarity in pottery use practices is illustrated through the wide general homogeneity in pottery form, perhaps suggesting that people perceived others as living in a similar way to them, albeit in a different landscape. The continuity of vessel forms acts to emphasise the way people use material culture in practices which maintain structure their social system, and how this system acts to reproduce the requirements for specific vessels for specific functions. The practices used to produce these vessels may have varied locally but this cannot be perceived from the archaeological record. The use of the turntable may be linked to wider economic pressures requiring larger vessels which was felt over the entire area. The development of oxidation firing may be linked to the development of craft specialisation, through an increasing understanding of the materials behaviour, which possibly also grew out of changing economic conditions, particularly the development of more intensive urban living. It also serves to create a distinction between those living on urban sites and the rural population. Decoration is possibly the most subtle indicator of the tension between localised and wider levels of interaction, both within and between settlements.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Different practices lead to identity becoming objectified at different levels. Clay procurement can be argued to be deeply embedded in a groups habitus (Bourdieu 1977,73), its second nature. This in turn allows strategies to become embedded

in yearly cycles linked to agriculture and other economic activities. Forming practices relate more intimately to small groups of potters and the reproduction of their learning networks. Superficial changes in form, as with changes in decoration are perhaps more illustrative of the fickle, situational aspects of identity. Firing, like forming, requires a high level of understanding and thus the increasing regularity in firing perhaps suggests the development of more craft specialists, supported by the increasing repertoire of vessels being produced. Ethnoarchaeological work in a number of environments suggest skills such as these develop where craft specialisation is more prevalent (Rice 1991, 268). The fuel resources required for firing also tie it into wider cycles of agriculture and landscape management meaning it acts to reproduce various inter personal and person/landscape/object relationships and perceptions.

Through pottery it can be argued that people generally perceived themselves as members of local and regional communities. These scales are more subtle than this however, linked to practices and interactions which occurred at these scales. The local level is based on communal histories in the landscape, localised practices based on the subsistence strategies and cemented by new formalised groupings. The regional level is perhaps linked to a common heritage, a common way of living and increasing economic and political interactions. These ideas of community are relational in themselves and although practices may be widely seen as signifying community, the values attached to them will vary depending upon individual relationships. This is not the whole story of identity. By looking at practice I have shown that different aspects of pottery manufacture relate to different spheres of perception and thus to different levels and scales of identity of both potters and non-potters. These practices both build new identities, cause older ones to dissolve and reproduce present ones. I have merely shown therefore that identity is present at a number of scales, is not static and is plural.

It is highly contextual relying on interactions between people and pots but also between people and other items of material culture as well as with the landscape.

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Captions:

Fig.1 Location of sites mentioned in the text. Copyright: Ben Jervis. Drawing: Ben Jervis

Fig. 2 Examples of Early Saxon Pottery from Botolphs, West Sussex (1:4). From Gardiner 1990, fig. 18. Reproduced courtesy of the Royal Archaeological Institute.

Fig.3 Examples of Late Saxon Pottery from Bishopstone, East Sussex. Drawing: Penny Copeland.

Fig. 4 Distribution of decorative forms in Sussex. After Cunliffe 1974 and Barton 1979. Copyright: Ben Jervis. Drawing: Ben Jervis.

Table 1: General outline of activities at three Saxon sites in Sussex based on the archaeological and historical evidence. After Gardiner 2003 and Down 1981.

Table 2: The primary clay source and it's distance from the site for selected sites in Sussex. Bold text indicates thin sectioning has been carried out. After Jervis

forthcoming a and b, Bell, 1977, Gardiner 1990, Gardiner 1993, Foster 1982,  
Down and Welch 1990, Chadwick 2006, Surtermeister 1974.